

THE SETTLEMENT OF NEW ICELAND IN MANITOBA



Manitoba 

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**In commemoration of the 125th Anniversary of the extension
of the boundary of Manitoba to include New Iceland**

*Cover: Arrival of the first Icelandic settlers at Willow Point, October 21, 1875.
From a painting by Arni Sigurdson, 1950. Photo courtesy of New Iceland
Heritage Museum.*

THE SETTLEMENT OF NEW ICELAND

IN MANITOBA

In 1875, when the first Icelandic settlers arrived in the Canadian West, Manitoba was a tiny "postage stamp" province approximately 33,280 square kilometres (13,000 square miles). To the north of Manitoba's boundary lay the vast unsettled wilderness of the North-West Territories, an area which originally included most of present-day Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. Into this area the newcomers from Iceland went to found a colony on the west shore of Lake Winnipeg. Called "New Iceland", the colony was one of the earliest group settlements in the West. Today, the reserve of land originally homesteaded by the Icelandic pioneers is part of Manitoba's Interlake region.

Harsh winters, Danish trade restrictions, and an epidemic which carried away 200,000 sheep, crippled Iceland's economy during the 1860s. The prospect of destitution made many consider leaving as an alternative, and from 1863-1873, a small but growing emigration movement developed. Initially, Brazil was favoured as a likely destination, with over 40 Icelanders immigrating to that country, and many more prepared to go when transportation difficulties blocked the movement. Attention then turned to North America. Inspired by enthusiastic letters from a Danish store clerk in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, four adventurous young men left Iceland in May, 1870. They were followed to North America by six people in 1871 and 22 in 1872. Among them was Sigtryggur Jonasson, a young government official who became the first Icelander to arrive in Canada.

A group of 115 Icelandic settlers joined Jonasson in Canada in 1873, taking up land in the Rosseau district of Ontario — a veritable wilderness of timber and rocks. In 1874, a second and larger group of 365 Icelanders arrived to homestead in Kinmount, Ontario. Suitable land for a large Icelandic colony in Ontario's Free Grant area was limited. In the spring of 1875, therefore, the newcomers' search for a colony site resumed. Many of the Kinmount group were attracted to Nova Scotia, while those who remained were persuaded by a Scottish missionary, John Taylor, to seek land in Manitoba or the North-West Territories.

Three emissaries, Taylor, Sigtryggur Jonasson, and Einar Jonasson, were elected to search for the new colony site in the West. The delegation was joined by several Icelandic settlers from Wisconsin and arrived at the frontier town of Winnipeg, Manitoba, on July 20, 1875. The young province had suffered a grasshopper plague that summer, but the Icelandic delegation was impressed with the land they inspected immediately north of Manitoba's boundary.

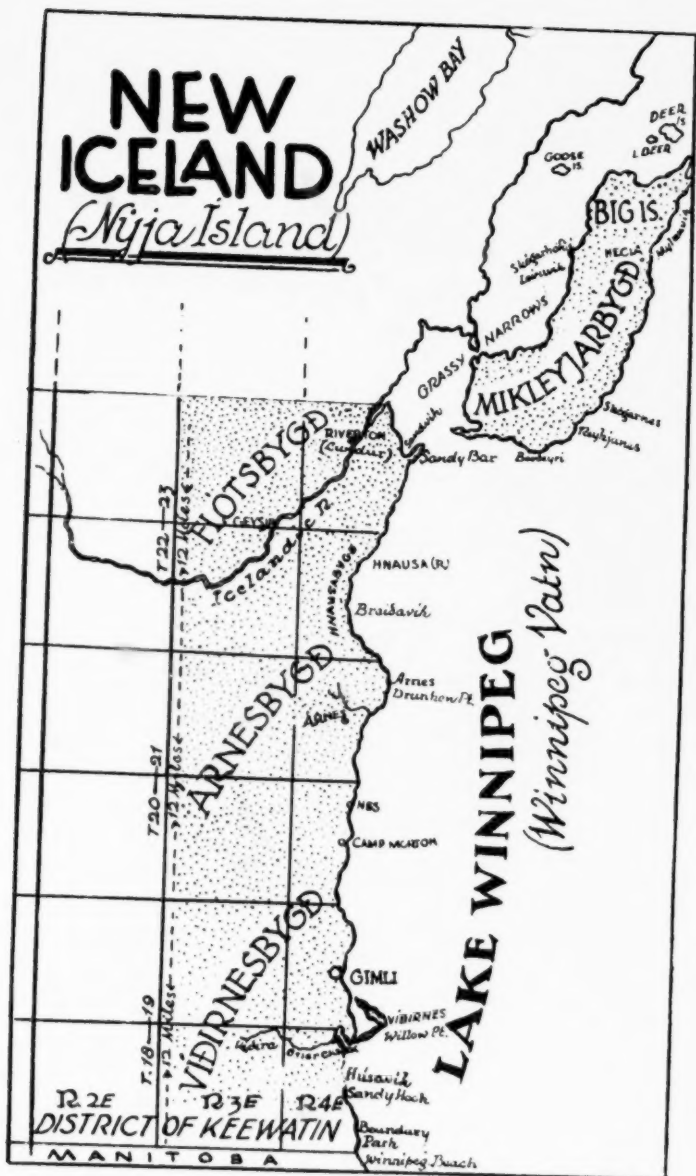
Equipped with a York boat and guide, the delegation travelled along the west shore of Lake Winnipeg to the White Mud River. In this wilderness territory, the fertile soil, evident by the lush tall grass, the abundance of fish, and the impressive stand of forest extending to the lakeshore, greatly attracted the delegates. The region had escaped the grasshopper plague; it promised suitable grazing for livestock, prosperous fishing, and plentiful fuel and building wood, so lacking in their homeland. Prospects of a transcontinental railway line being constructed to the south at Selkirk, and the likelihood of greater accessibility to the area, added to the potential value of the land.

The delegates selected an area extending 57.9 kilometres (36 miles) along the western shore of Lake Winnipeg, from Manitoba's northern boundary at Boundary Creek, near present-day Winnipeg Beach, to north of the White Mud River, which was renamed "Icelander's River" (now the Icelandic River). The reserve, which also included Big Island, now Hecla Island, was proudly designated "New Iceland".

Upon the delegation's return to Kinmount, the settlers quickly voted to move west that autumn. After a vigorous recruitment campaign in Ontario, 270 settlers led by John Taylor left the colony on September 25, 1875. Joined by more settlers in Toronto, the group proceeded from Sarnia, Ontario, to Duluth, Minnesota, on a steamer which was filled with people, luggage, and a consignment of hogs. Thirteen of the Wisconsin Icelanders joined them at Duluth, and the enlarged group travelled by train to the end of the line at Fisher's Landing, Minnesota. From Fisher's Landing, they proceeded north to Winnipeg with the steamer *International*, most of the settlers being towed on rafts behind the boat.

Great curiosity and excitement greeted the weary newcomers when they arrived in Winnipeg, on October 11, 1875. A large crowd had gathered at the steamboat landing to catch a glimpse of them and the next day, the **Manitoba Free Press** commented, "They are a smart-looking, intelligent and excellent people and a most valuable acquisition to the population..."

With winter fast approaching, the settlers decided to move immediately to the colony site. All those who could obtain employment in Winnipeg were advised to remain behind, and about 50 of the group, mainly young women who received employment as domestic servants, did so. The majority, however, left Winnipeg on October 16, travelling down the Red River on six flatboats and a York boat to the St. Andrew's Rapids. From that point, aided by the Hudson's Bay Company steamer *Colville*, they were escorted to Willow Point, where their long, arduous journey came to an end on October 21, 1875.



Map of New Iceland
Photo courtesy of Archives of Manitoba.

The arrival at Willow Point, near present-day Gimli, so late in the season, ruled out proceeding to the Icelandic River, 32 kilometres (20 miles) further north, as the settlers had originally planned. Instead, they chose to pitch tents quickly at Willow Point and set to work building shelters for the winter. Thirty shanties, 3.7 metres by 4.9 metres (12 feet by 16 feet) soon arose in the clearing, with two or three families sharing each house. Farm buildings were constructed and by January, 1876, a school, housing 30 pupils, was established.

During the first winter at Willow Point, daily administration of the colony was virtually in the hands of the settlers themselves. A council of five members, elected by the settlers on January 4, 1876, supervised the health and sanitation of the colony, recorded applications for land pending the land survey, and distributed government supplies to the pioneers. The council functioned as the colony's first local government, communicating the progress and problems of the settlers to authorities in Manitoba and Ottawa.

With the arrival of spring, one-half of the population dispersed to Winnipeg and rural farms to find work. Fishing on the lake improved and ducks and rabbits were abundant. Most of the settlers had already cleared .8 to 1.2 hectares (two or three acres) of land and the arduous work of farming started.

In the summer, with the arrival of 1,200 new immigrants from Iceland, the life of the settlement blossomed. The "large group" left Iceland after volcanic eruptions of the Dyngja Mountains had laid waste to 6,474.5 square kilometres (2,500 square miles) of land. Unlike the first group, the "large group" was unfamiliar with pioneer life, but they proved hardy, settling New Iceland up to the Icelandic River, near present-day Riverton, including Big (Hecla) Island. The prospect of a well-populated, prosperous community certainly appeared bright in the summer of 1876, and all energies were turned to making the vision a thriving reality.

Clearing the land for cultivation, working on the government road, and fishing, dominated the early life of the colony. Although the Icelanders were experienced deep-sea fishermen, their first attempts at fishing on Lake Winnipeg were not successful. The mesh of their nets was either too small or too large for the lake's fish species and suitable nets were not readily available. When they tried ice-fishing, the nets were lowered into shallow water, becoming embedded in ice. A five-dollar reward was offered to the man who caught the first fish; the winner caught a goldeye — a species unknown to the Icelanders. Initially, as they were unable to find game or fish in any large numbers, the group's supplies ran dangerously low until replenished with dried moose meat and milk from neighbouring Aboriginal people. As the settlers adapted to the new conditions, fishing gradually improved. Hunting for ducks and rabbits resulted in the settlers being able to supplement their diet. Fish continued to be the colony's staple, however, and many individuals complained that even their milk tasted of fish.

Preparing the land for cultivation proved difficult. Without adequate clothing for the harsh winter, settlers frequently cleared forest growth bare-handed. On the farms, often situated on poor, rocky soil, work was slow and laborious. Forests had to be cleared by hand, while hay was cut with a scythe, piled in heaps with a fork and carried on the settler's backs to an enclosed storage area. The colony's first two cows were acquired during the spring of 1876, and shortly thereafter 20 more were added. While the Icelanders were overjoyed to have livestock, one woman tearfully lamented that she would "never be able to really love a foreign cow." Later, when sheep were brought to the colony, the women spent their evenings carding and spinning wool or knitting socks and mittens.

Undoubtedly, the greatest hardship suffered by the settlers in the first few years, was the smallpox epidemic of 1876-77. The dreaded disease first appeared in September, shortly after the arrival of the "large group", but it was thought to be chicken pox and not considered serious. When the danger was recognized in early November, physicians and medical supplies for the colony were urgently requested.

The Manitoba government responded by sending Drs. David Young, James S. Lynch, and A. Baldwin to curb the spread of the disease. New Iceland was placed under quarantine on November 27, 1876. A makeshift hospital in a government storehouse was organized in Gimli and a quarantine station established at Netley Creek.

Abetted by severe weather conditions, overcrowding due to the large influx of settlers that summer, and inadequate provisions, the epidemic spread throughout the colony. Over one-third of the settlers contracted the disease and 100 people died. Sandy River, a nearby First Nations community, was decimated. Fortunately, the makeshift hospital proved successful, saving all but one of its 64 patients.

By April, 1877, the epidemic had subsided, but the quarantine remained in effect until June 20. Growing restless over their imposed isolation, the colonists led a peaceful demonstration to Netley Creek to ask authorities to end the restrictions. When they arrived, they discovered that the restrictions had been lifted the previous night.

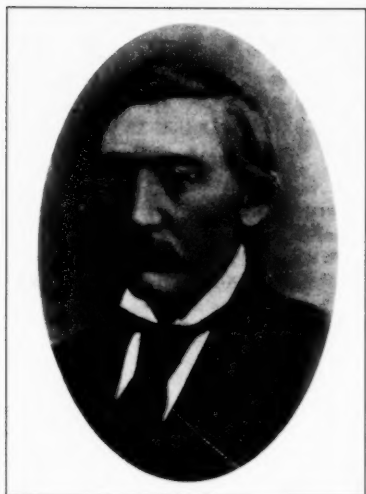
To meet hardship and unexpected disaster, an effective form of local government for New Iceland was imperative. The local council, which had been elected in January, 1876, during the first winter at Willow Point, was short-lived and had been dissolved in the spring of 1876, when New Iceland was officially transferred to the newly created District of Keewatin by the federal government. Established under the **North-West Territories Act**, April 12, 1876, the new district extended from Manitoba's northern boundary at Boundary Creek, to the northern limits of Canada. It was to be governed by a council of five to ten appointed members, with the Lieutenant-Governor of Manitoba as ex officio Lieutenant-Governor of the district. The council of Keewatin, however, was not organized in time to

meet the pressing needs created by the large influx of settlers in the summer of 1876 and the horrors of a smallpox epidemic that fall and winter. To alleviate the situation during the interim, the settlers held their own meetings in January, 1877, despite the epidemic, to discuss colony government as well as other matters of concern. After a series of public meetings, a provisional constitution outlining a democratic system of government for New Iceland was drafted. Elections were held on February 14, 1877.

Under the provisional constitution, the New Iceland colony was named **Vatnsthing** (Lake Region) and divided into four districts like the ancient quarter-sections of 10th century Iceland: **Vidinesbyggd** (Willow Point district), **Arnesbyggd** (Arnes district), **Fljotsbyggd** (River district), and **Mikleyjarbyggd** (Big Island district). Each district elected its own council of five members by popular vote, but the reeve and deputy reeve of each district council were chosen from within the council. A regional council of six members, called the **Thingrad**, administered the general affairs of the entire colony. Reeves from the four districts sat on the regional council; the President, **Thingradstjóri** and Vice-President, **Vara Thingradstjóri** were elected annually by all eligible voters of the colony. The **Thingrad** represented the colony in all relations with the Canadian government, summoned meetings of the colony council, kept a minute book for meetings, entered all public accounts of the colony, and advised district reeves in important matters. In a disagreement between district councils, the colony council made the decision or referred the matter to arbitration. An eligible voter had to be at least 21 years of age and a permanent resident of the colony, and to have an unblemished character.

This form of local government remained in effect until 1881, when the boundaries of Manitoba were extended and New Iceland became a part of the Province of Manitoba. Provisions were then made for the establishment of a municipal government in accordance with local municipal government practice elsewhere in Manitoba. Despite initial resistance, the municipal form of government was finally adopted by 1887, ending a system of local government unique to New Iceland.

Recovery from the epidemic and the rigours of adjusting to a new land did not preclude the development of a rich cultural and social life. Traditional evening pastimes of reading and reciting stories from the Bible and the Icelandic sagas were actively enjoyed by the settlers. In many a humble home 20 or more books could be found, a testimony to the high value placed on literacy by the Icelanders. One enterprising man even created a handwritten newspaper and travelled from house to house in the colony to read it to others. The desire to preserve the Icelandic language and rich heritage of Icelandic literature in North America was urgently felt. **Framfari**, the first Icelandic newspaper in the colony, fulfilled this role. Printed in a log cabin at Lundi (later Riverton), the first issue of **Framfari** appeared on September 1, 1877. Four-page issues were printed three times monthly, but plagued with financial problems, the paper ceased publication in 1880.



Pall Thorlaksson
Photo courtesy of Archives of
Manitoba.



Jon Bjarnason
Photo courtesy of Archives of
Manitoba.

Dances, meetings, and sporting events were held, the social highlight of the year being New Year's Eve with the "burning of the old year" celebrations. A huge pyre was erected on the ice and at the New Year's Eve gathering, one man appeared dressed as the old year in a long white beard of rabbit's fur, a white smock, and a tar-paper hat, while leaning on a cane and holding a bottle and glass which were both empty. After he bade farewell, the new year arrived from the east — a young man accompanied by twelve sprites, six dressed in white and six in green, ushering in an evening of merriment.

The suitability of the New Iceland reserve for settlement, the question of opening the area to non-Icelandic settlers, and religion, were issues hotly debated in the community during the early years. Many of the colonists desired the leadership of the Reverend Pall Thorlaksson, conservative leader of the Icelanders in the United States. A member of the Norwegian Missouri Lutheran Synod, which discouraged either pastor or congregation from doctrinal re-interpretations, Thorlaksson arrived in New Iceland in 1877. The Reverend John Bjarnason of Minneapolis, Minnesota, also accepted a call to organize congregations in New Iceland from colonists who wished to secure the services of an Icelandic pastor not bound to any synod.

Cleavage between the **Jónsmenn** and **Pálsmenn**, as the followers of Reverend Jon Bjarnason and the Reverend Pall Thorlaksson were called, developed in the winter of 1877-78. Doctrinal differences were coupled with opposing outlooks on the future of New Iceland. An advocate of opening the colony to non-Icelandic settlement, the Reverend Jon Bjarnason held the view that the New Iceland site, with its abundant natural resources, could thrive and that the main objective of the settlers in their adopted country should be to become a new people, unfettered by tradition. The Reverend Pall Thorlaksson, convinced the colony would inevitably fail, stood for the preservation of links with the Norwegian Lutheran Synod and the traditional Icelandic Lutheran ways.

The controversy resulted in many new plans for the construction of church buildings in the settlement, with churches started in the Vidines district, at Breiduvik and on Big Island. Most of the churches were never completed but were used in an unfinished state. The church at Icelandic River (Riverton), made of unpeeled logs plastered with clay, was the only one to be completed, but has long since disappeared. Differences of opinion between the Jónsmenn and the Pálsmenn finally subsided when Thorlaksson led a mass exodus of the colonists to newly opened land in North Dakota in 1879. At the height of this movement, many farmers, frustrated with the rocky, unproductive land in New Iceland, left, and only 50 of the original 200 families remained in the entire settlement.

Despite the controversies and natural disasters, such as the flood of 1880, the remaining settlers persevered. After the end of the North Dakota migration, the pace of settlement life began to quicken somewhat. A sawmill had been established on Hecla Island in 1878 and a store had been opened in Gimli. In 1879, the steamer *Victoria*, purchased by two Icelandic entrepreneurs, created desperately needed jobs in the floundering colony. While the settlement still had poor roads and dense forests, new immigrants from the homeland began to move onto the vacant lands. Gimli expanded from five houses in 1885 to over 40 in 1891. With the population rising to 1,557 in 1894, the settlers developed a fish trade with the United States. Creameries were established at Gimli and Riverton. The railway reached Gimli in 1905, stimulating commerce and opening the area to summer cottagers.

The gradual expansion of settlement and new transportation links with other areas of Manitoba led the Icelandic settlers to become more involved in provincial affairs. They rallied to banners of the temperance and women's suffrage movements. Led by Margaret J. Benedictsson, the Icelandic Suffrage Society was formed in 1908, predating similar organizations in the rest of the province by a few years. The Icelandic Suffrage Society actively helped popularize the right to vote for women, with two suffrage petitions presented to the Manitoba Legislature in 1910.



Gimli, Manitoba in 1906
Photo courtesy of Archives of Manitoba.

In 1897, the New Iceland reserve was opened to settlement by any individual willing to homestead in the area. The first to come were Ukrainian pioneers, who began to homestead in the Pleasant Home district southwest of Gimli by June, 1897. They were joined by Polish and Hungarian settlers soon afterwards. Schools, libraries, community centres, and choirs organized by the new settlers appeared throughout the Interlake region. By 1917 the area had exchanged its exclusively Icelandic character for a wealth of different traditions and cultures.



Gimli Harbour, 1921
Photo courtesy of Archives of Manitoba.



Harvesting near Riverton, 1890
Photo courtesy of Archives of Manitoba.

Since the first Icelandic settlers had landed at Willow Point on October 21, 1875, New Iceland had evolved from an expanse of wilderness to a settled, agricultural area of Manitoba. Despite the initial years of struggle and hardship, the Icelandic pioneers had established their rich heritage in the new land. Today, three commemorative plaques, one in Riverton, the other two in Gimli, pay tribute to the perseverance of these early pioneers and their unique settlement, "New Iceland".



A freight gang hauling fish to Riverton, 1920
Photo courtesy of Archives of Manitoba.

BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR FURTHER READING

Many comprehensive secondary sources are available to the general reader interested in the history of the Icelandic people in Canada. For a general overview see W.J. Lindal's *The Icelanders in Canada*, published by Viking Press, 1967. For full and engrossing accounts of Icelandic settlement in Manitoba, see Wilhelm Kristjanson's *The Icelandic People in Manitoba, A Manitoba Saga*, published by Wallingford Press Ltd. in 1965, and Dr. Steinn Thompson's *Riverton and the Icelandic Settlement*, published in 1976, by Thordis Thompson of Riverton. Nelson S. Gerrard's *The Icelandic Saga*, Saga Publications, 1985, and Ingibjorg Sigurdeirsson McKillop's *Mikley The Magnificent Island, Hecla Island 1876-1976*, published in 1979, tell the stories of individual settlements in the Interlake area.

Numerous historical articles on early Icelandic settlement, and social and cultural life, may be found in *The Icelandic Canadian*, published quarterly by the Icelandic Canadian, Winnipeg. Also see David Arnason and Vincent Arnason's *The New Icelanders, a North American Community*, published in 1994 by Turnstone Press.

Provincial Plaques

ICELANDIC SETTLEMENT — GIMLI

In October 1875 the first permanent Icelandic settlement in Canada was established in this district. The original destination of this group of about 250 was the White Mud (Icelandic) River but due to the threat of winter they landed further south at Willow Point. Near here the first buildings were erected and a townsite was laid out and called Gimli after the home of the gods in Norse mythology. The following year upwards of 1200 settlers located themselves along the west shore of Lake Winnipeg. This was the foundation of the largest Icelandic settlement outside of Iceland.

This inscription is on a plaque erected by the Historic Sites Advisory Board of Manitoba* and located in Gimli Park, entrance at junction of Amisk Drive and 3rd Avenue, Gimli, Manitoba.

ICELANDIC SETTLEMENT — RIVERTON

In 1875 the first group of Icelandic settlers in the Canadian west, bound for the mouth of the White Mud River, were forced by circumstances to land at Willow Point, further south. There they founded Gimli, but the following year upwards of 1200 settlers located themselves along the west shore of Lake Winnipeg as far as Hecla Island. They renamed the White Mud the Icelandic River. Besides Gimli two towns were surveyed, one called Sandy Bar at the mouth of the Icelandic River, and Lundi, which was later renamed Riverton.

This inscription is on a plaque erected by the Historic Sites Advisory Board of Manitoba* and located north of Riverton off P.T.H. 234.

SIGTRYGGUR JONASSON — 1852-1942

Born at Bakki, Iceland, this publisher and entrepreneur became a prominent leader in the Canadian Icelandic community. As immigration agent he brought from Iceland more than a thousand people driven from their homeland by a volcanic eruption. They settled in 1876 on the west shore of Lake Winnipeg. Homesteading near Riverton, he was instrumental in establishing the unique laws and constitution of the Republic of New Iceland.

In 1877 he founded *Framfari*, the first Icelandic newspaper on this continent. This was supported by the community of fishermen and farmers in spite of severe economic hardship and a smallpox epidemic. He also founded *Lögberg* in Winnipeg. These newspapers contributed greatly to the survival in North America of Icelandic language and literature.

Jonasson became a M.L.A. in 1896, the first elected Icelandic-Canadian legislator. In 1930 he was chosen to represent Canada at the millennium of Iceland's Parliament.

This inscription is on a plaque erected by the Historic Sites Advisory Board of Manitoba* and located in Gimli Park, entrance at junction of Amisk Drive and 3rd Avenue, Gimli, Manitoba.

*now known as the Manitoba Heritage Council

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